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ABSTRACT

All children must receive the excellent instruction and support they need to learn to read and write. In this position statement, the International Reading Association reviews the challenges the schools face and outlines support children need to become competent readers and writers. The statement pinpoints 10 principles which provide a means for evaluating current policy and classroom practice, and a direction for change where it is necessary: (1) Children have a right to appropriate early reading instruction based on individual needs; (2) Children have a right to reading instruction that builds both skills and the desire to read increasingly complex materials; (3) Children have a right to well-prepared teachers who keep their skills up to date through professional development; (4) Children have a right to access a wide variety of books and reading material in classroom, school, and community libraries; (5) Children have a right to reading assessment that identifies their strengths and their needs and involves them in making decisions about their learning; (6) Children who are struggling with reading have a right to receive intensive instruction from professionals specifically prepared to teach reading; (7) Children have a right to reading instruction that involves parents and communities in their academic lives; (8) Children have a right to reading instruction that makes meaningful use of their first language skills; (9) Children have the right to equal access to the technology used for the improvement of reading instruction; and (10) Children have the right to classrooms that optimize learning opportunities. (NKA)

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ED 442 081

A Position Statement of the International Reading Association

Making a Difference Means Making It Different

Honoring Children's Rights to Excellent Reading Instruction

CS 013 976

INTERNATIONAL Reading Association

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I. Honoring Children's Rights

Ultimately, most children learn to read and write in classrooms. Honoring children's rights to effective instruction requires a willingness to question whether today's classrooms are set up to meet their needs as readers and writers. The 10 principles outlined here provide a means for evaluating current policy and classroom practice, and a direction for change where it is necessary.

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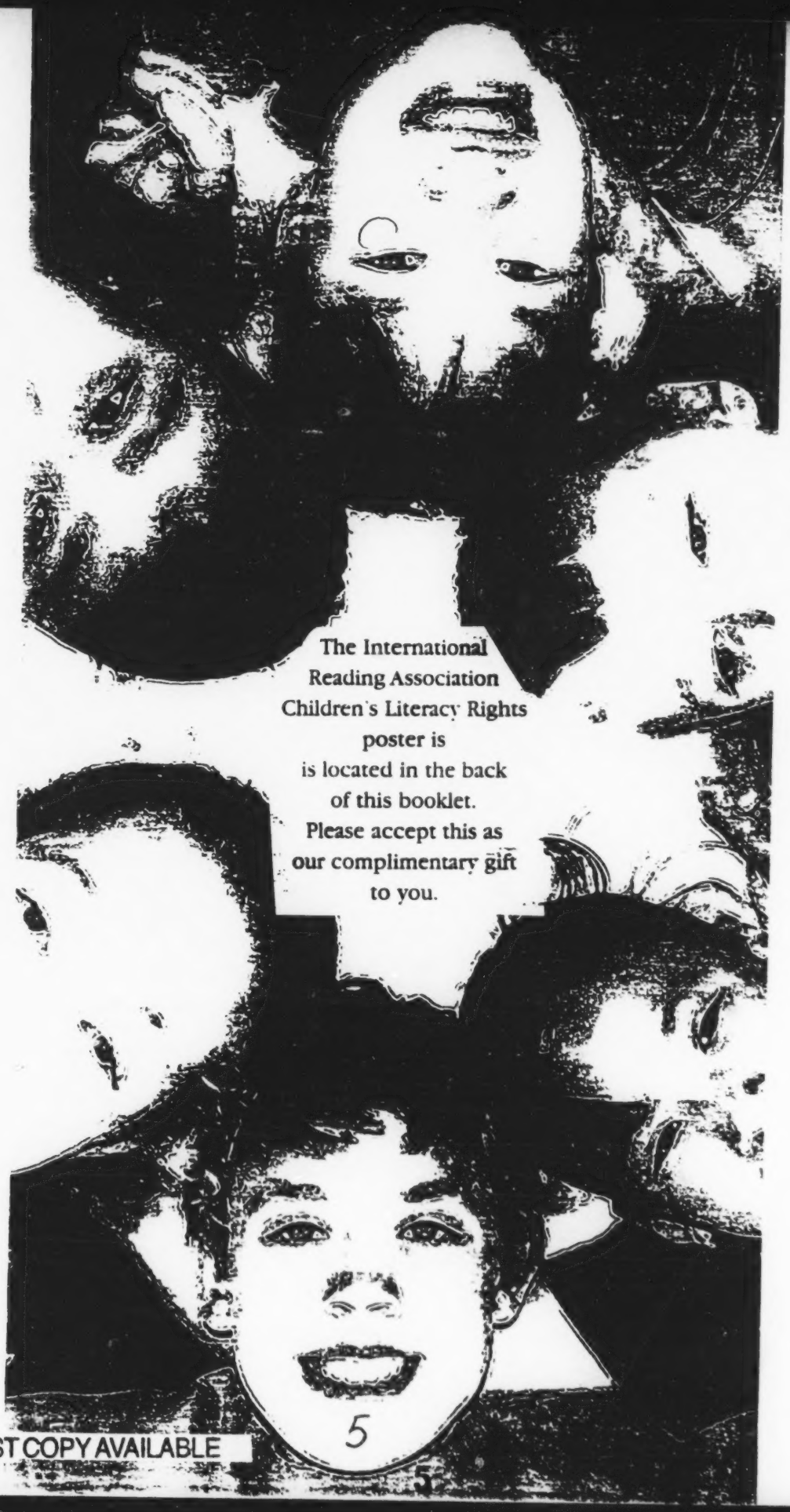

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All American children can learn to read and write, and many, even most, are learning. But too many American children read and write poorly. When our schools fail to teach any child to read and write, they fail all of us. We must ensure that all children receive the excellent instruction and support they need to learn to read and write. In this document, the International Reading Association reviews the challenges schools face and outlines support children need to become competent readers and writers.

Today's teachers are under great pressure to improve student performance and meet quantifiable standards of achievement. At the same time, schools face serious challenges brought on by changes in American society: Stress on families and family support systems is increasing. The school-age population of the United States is growing more diverse. Teacher shortages threaten as the demand for high quality teachers grows. Meanwhile, poverty remains a persistent feature of the American economic system.

In the face of these complex challenges there can be no single, simple solution to the problem of teaching America's children to read proficiently. Policies that benefit some children while leaving the needs of

others unaddressed fall short of the goal of helping all children to become competent readers and writers. Programs that center on one part of the literacy equation at the expense of others train readers who may be unable to understand or enjoy what they read. Instead of focusing narrowly on one aspect of the problem or one instructional strategy, educators and policy makers need to take a broader view.

The International Reading Association is convinced that efforts to improve children's reading and writing achievement must begin by recognizing the right of every child to receive the best possible reading instruction. From this basic right the Association has developed a set of 10 principles to serve as a guide for formulating educational policy and practice. They are presented here in the belief that excellent reading instruction can and will make a difference in children's lives.

1. Honoring Children's Rights

Ultimately, most children learn to read and write in classrooms. Honoring children's rights to effective instruction requires a willingness to question whether today's classrooms are set up to meet their needs as readers and writers. The 10 principles outlined here provide a means for evaluating current policy and classroom practice, and a direction for change where it is necessary.

Children have a right to appropriate early reading instruction based on their individual needs.

No single method or single combination of methods can successfully teach a children to read. Instead, each child must be helped to develop the skills and understandings he or she needs to become a reader. These include the following:

- a motivation to read,
- appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from text,
- sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension,
- the ability to decode unfamiliar words,
- the ability to read fluently, and
- an understanding of how speech sounds (phonemes) are connected to print.

Because children learn differently, teachers must be familiar with a wide range of proven methods for helping children gain these skills. They also must have thorough knowledge of the children they teach, so they can provide the appropriate balance of methods needed for each child.

Because there is no clearly documented best, or only, way to teach reading, teachers and reading specialists who are familiar with a wide range of methodologies and who are closest to the children must be the ones to make the decisions about what reading methods and materials to use. Furthermore, these professionals must have the flexibility to modify those methods when they determine that particular children are not learning. Each child must be provided with an appropriate combination of methods.

Children have a right to reading instruction that builds both the skill and the desire to read increasingly complex materials.

Children need well-developed repertoires of reading comprehension and study strategies, including the ability to

- question themselves about what they read,
- synthesize information from various sources,
- identify, understand, and remember key vocabulary,
- recognize how a text is organized and use that organization as a tool for learning,
- organize information in notes,
- interpret diverse symbol systems in subjects such as biology and algebra,
- search the Internet for information,
- judge their own understanding, and
- evaluate authors' ideas and perspectives.

However, helping children develop these advanced reading comprehension skills is insufficient if children are not motivated to read. Unfortunately, students' interest in reading—particularly that of struggling readers—tends to decline as they advance into the middle grades. Children deserve teachers who act on children's interests and who design meaningful inquiry projects to promote the desire to read.

Children have a right to well-prepared teachers who keep their skills up to date through effective professional development.

Teachers skilled in the wide range of methods for teaching reading must be at the core of all reform efforts directed at improving children's reading achievement. They must

- understand reading and writing development;
- continually assess individual children's progress and relate reading instruction to children's previous experiences;
- know a variety of strategies for teaching reading, when to use each, and how to combine these into an effective instructional program;
- know and use a variety of reading materials and texts for children to read;
- use flexible grouping strategies to tailor instruction to individuals; and
- be good reading "coaches" (who give appropriate help strategically).

Preservice education must provide beginning teachers with a solid knowledge base and substantial classroom practice to ensure their basic competence.

In addition, all teachers, even the most experienced, need high quality professional development. They need to be aware of new information in the fields of child develoment, cognitive psychology, and literacy education. And they need time to integrate changes into their instruction.

Children have a right to access a wide variety of books and other reading material in classroom, school, and community libraries.

Children who read more read better. Children who have access to varied sources of print materials in their classrooms, school libraries, town libraries and at home, and who are allowed to choose what they read, read more for pleasure and for information. Children who do a substantial amount of voluntary reading are positive about reading and are good readers.

To encourage children to read widely and willingly, school libraries must

- have the funding to purchase a sufficient number of new books per student each year;
- contain about 20 books per child in school libraries and 7 per student in classroom libraries;
- add two new books per student to school libraries, and one book per student to classroom libraries each year;
- include picture books, fiction and nonfiction, magazines, poetry, and many other types of texts to match the interests of all the children.

Children's access to books is so fundamental that it is often overlooked. In recent years, school and classroom libraries have deteriorated. Library collections that are now inadequate and outdated must be improved to meet children's needs.

Children have a right to reading assessment that identifies their strengths as well as their needs and involves them in making decisions about their own learning.

Using tests based on mandated standards to determine which students will graduate or which type of diploma students will receive is particularly detrimental to children from low-income homes or homes in which English is not the first language. High-stakes national or statewide tests are being used this way in some states, despite the fact that the results rarely provide information that helps teachers decide which specific teaching/learning experiences will foster literacy development. The practice hurts those most in need of enriched educational opportunities. Children deserve classroom assessments that bridge the gap between what they know and are able to do and relevant curriculum standards. Effective assessments are crucial for students who are falling behind. They deserve assessments that map a path toward their continued literacy growth.

Children deserve classroom assessments that

- are regular extensions of instruction;
- provide useful feedback based on clear, attainable, worthwhile standards;
- exemplify quality performances illustrating the standards; and
- position students as partners with teachers in evaluating their progress and setting goals.

Assessments must provide information for instructional decision making as well as for public accountability.

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Children who are struggling with reading have a right to receive intensive instruction from professionals specifically prepared to teach reading.

Children learn to read and write at different rates and in different ways. There are significant numbers of children who struggle with reading and writing. Many of these children need more and different kinds of instruction, and they have a right to instruction that is designed with their specific needs in mind. Reading specialists are specifically prepared to supervise and/or provide this instruction.

When readers struggle, reading specialists should be called upon

- to provide tutoring in reading that is part of a comprehensive program involving subject-matter, teachers, parents, and the community;
- to structure challenging and relevant instruction that allows students to succeed and become self-sufficient learners;
- to assess students' reading and writing, and to enable students to control their own learning by assessing their own reading and writing;
- to support learners immediately when their progress slows;
- to teach decoding, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and study strategies tailored to individual abilities;
- to relate literacy practices to life management issues such as exploring careers, examining individual roles in society, setting goals, managing time and stress, and resolving conflicts; and
- to offer reading programs that recognize potentially limiting forces such as work schedules, family responsibilities, and peer pressure.

No school can provide adequate reading and writing instruction for all children without the specific expertise in reading and writing offered by specialists.

Children have a right to reading instruction that involves parents and communities in their academic lives.

Growing in literacy means continually stretching. Consequently, children deserve support, not only from school, but also from their families, their communities, and their nation. This support can be delivered through the following means:

- Parents can engage their children in discussions about what they read, respond sincerely to what they write, and make lots of printed materials available.
- Libraries, religious groups, and after-school programs can provide space and volunteers to assist children with homework, to tutor children, and to initiate book discussion groups.
- Businesses can allow employees to become involved in mentoring programs that emphasize reading. They can work with school personnel and parents to provide needed resources.
- Policy makers can give attention and appropriate funding for reading and writing services in the upper grades as well as the early grades. (In most international comparisons, it is in the upper grades that American children perform less well.)
- Government can support ongoing staff development, provide funds for reduced class sizes and for purchase of reading materials, and support literacy research across the grade levels, especially including the upper grades.

Ensuring that all children learn to read and write requires the cooperation of a wide group of stakeholders. It takes the whole community to teach all children to read and write.

Children have a right to reading instruction that makes meaningful use of their first language skills.

Initial literacy instruction should be provided in a child's native language whenever possible. Research shows that while initial literacy learning in a second language can be successful, it is riskier than starting with a child's first language—especially for those children affected by poverty, low levels of parental education, or poor schooling.

Policies on initial instruction should

- support the professional judgment of the teachers and administrators responsible for teaching students whose first language is not English,
- encourage research and demonstration projects for second-language literacy learners, and
- not mandate particular instructional methodologies or strategies.

The number of second-language literacy learners in American schools is increasing rapidly and dramatically. Schools and communities must provide sufficient attention and resources to help these children learn to read and write and ultimately to do so in English.

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Children have the right to equal access to the technology used for the improvement of reading instruction.

The growth of technology, including Internet access, is fundamentally transforming nearly every aspect of traditional literacy, creating not only new opportunities but also new challenges for teachers, students, parents, school districts, teacher educators, researchers, and governments. Lack of equity in access to technology increasingly is limiting literacy opportunities for many children. Recent data from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that the percentage of Internet connections is about one-third less for schools in which minority enrollment exceeds 50 percent or where more than 71 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches than for other schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

Children learning to read deserve to share equally in the benefits of new technology. This will require

- equal access to technology that supports reading instruction,
- teachers who have had sufficient staff development or initial preparation to use technology with confidence, and
- adequate funding for research about the interface between new technologies and literacy development.

The United States must make a larger investment to expand the access of all children to technology. In addition, schools, teacher education institutions, professional development providers, and researchers at all levels must be encouraged and supported as they devote more energy and resources toward this goal.

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Children have a right to classrooms that optimize learning opportunities.

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Teachers and children cannot improve reading achievement without strong support from every stakeholder. In some schools, class sizes are large, materials are in short supply, teachers are teaching with inappropriate or no credentials, discipline is inadequate, and buildings are crumbling. Citizens who are serious about improving reading achievement must be held accountable for providing

- appropriate student-teacher ratios,
- instructional materials,
- certified teachers,
- discipline supported by families and the community, and
- buildings in sound physical condition.

If teachers and children are to be held to high standards in reading achievement, communities must be held to high levels of support.

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II. Context and Consequences

THE LEGACY OF REFORM

The desire to reform education in the United States is hardly new. Today's reform efforts can learn from and build on those of the past.

In the past 35 years, the national commitment of the United States to educational equity has intensified. Beginning with Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, Congress recognized the crucial relationship between poverty and reading achievement. In creating Title I, Congress hoped that supplementing basic education resources at high-poverty schools would close the achievement gap between rich and poor children.

In the wake of Title I a new body of law was created, and with it came a new set of expectations. The focus of reform efforts shifted from providing children with equal resources to providing children with effective instruction—that which produced competent reading and writing. In the 1970s, reform programs focused on providing schools with access to good information about reading programs. In the 1980s, with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), school improvement became a major item on the political agenda. Ideas about privatization, reducing federal government involvement, and changing how the schools did business began to take hold. By the early 1990s, the standards movement was the organizing principle of change. And by the mid-1990s, research-based practice had the spotlight.

While these reform movements have been powerful in identifying problems and in changing the focus from equal opportunity to equal performance, their results have been disappointing. They have not yet been able to achieve equal levels of performance—that is, reading and writing competence that is not related to children's economic and social status.

The International Reading Association believes that reform efforts have fallen short because they have not recognized the extent of the problems and the comprehensiveness of the solutions it will take to ensure that all children leave schools as readers and writers. Simply raising standards, testing children, providing early intervention, improving teacher education, and using research-based practices will not work because each addresses only isolated facets of classroom reading instruction.

THE CHALLENGES OF THE PRESENT

Both society and children have changed in major ways in the 35 years since Title I was enacted. The challenges of poverty remain, and there are accelerating trends that increase the difficulties teachers face. Classrooms are becoming ever more diverse. They include children from a wide range of racial, ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds who have a wide range of educational needs. Families are increasingly stressed. And at the same time there is a pressing need to improve instruction, schools are a facing a teacher shortage.

***Poverty*—a persistent challenge.** While research is clear that poverty does not necessarily cause school failure, it is a powerful risk factor for reading and writing difficulties. Children of poverty are more likely than others to enter school without the knowledge and background necessary for learning to read and write. They are more likely to fail at school tasks, thus decreasing motivation. Reducing the impact of poverty will require instruction that is sensitive to the children's own

knowledge and background and consistent in supporting children as individual learners, each with his or her own set of strengths and needs. In all probability, poverty will persist, and teachers will be forced to teach reading and writing well despite its difficulties.

***Diversity*—an accelerating trend.** The school-age population of the United States is increasingly diverse. While the teaching force remains predominantly white and female, the school-age population is increasingly African American, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander. Census statistics for the 1940–1960 period show that nonwhite students totaled only 11–12 percent of total enrollment. By 1996, the nonwhite enrollment was 36 percent, and the Census Bureau has projected that the total school-age population will reach 58 percent nonwhite by 2050 (Orfield & Yun, 1999). Teachers are more frequently teaching children who come from backgrounds very different from their own. Knowing and understanding children's backgrounds is a critical feature of good teaching, and the more diversity in children's backgrounds, the tougher the challenge for the classroom teacher. Add to this diversity the number of children learning English as a second language, and factor in the trend toward including children with diverse educational needs in the classrooms, and the difficulty is compounded.

***Families*—increasingly stressed.** More and more children are growing up in single-parent and two-working-parent families. At a time when parents' free time is decreasing, their children's needs for school-related support are increasing. When family life does not allow for a focus on schoolwork at home, the children's success depends more than ever on the classroom teacher.

***Teachers*—a developing shortage.** At a time when policy makers are calling for better preparation and in-service development for teachers (while also calling for an end to practices that place unqualified or underqualified people in teaching positions), the United States is facing a national teacher shortage, particularly in the urban centers. Some experts forecast that American schools will need to hire more than 2 million teachers in the next decade (NCES, 1997). Maintaining quality in the face of high demand and low supply is an enormous challenge.

MOVING FORWARD

In the face of such challenges as these, how can meaningful improvement in reading instruction be realized? First and most profoundly, the idea of the classroom must change. School classrooms today have the same basic organizational pattern as they had 50 years ago—one teacher and many students. While many schools make creative use of teachers, few schools are able to provide children a high degree of individualized instruction. This needs to change. Classrooms must become places where many professionals interact to help each child learn. In many successful reading reform efforts, principals and teachers working together with skilled reading professionals have made this transformation and have increased children's reading achievement dramatically (Charles A. Dana Center, 1999).

Second, communities that seek higher achievement in education must invest heavily in professional development, reading materials, and educational research. Intensified professional development efforts are a necessity for all personnel who contribute to the

reading program. This investment must begin with improving the initial preparation of teachers and extend to developing higher levels of expertise among practicing reading teachers. Communities must also invest in preparing reading specialists who (in addition to teaching children) can support other teachers and guide reform efforts. Principals also must have access to excellent professional development in reading. But the investment must go beyond preparation of individual professionals to focus on ways in which they can work together in tomorrow's schools and classrooms.

Access to books and other print materials is also essential, and it will take a sizable investment to upgrade and maintain deteriorating collections. Children do not become readers if they do not have access to books they can read and want to read. This means that all children must have access to a wide and rich assortment of reading materials. In particular, ways must be found to equalize access to high-quality reading materials for children attending high-poverty schools.

In addition, the United States must expand educational research and develop ways to use the findings of that research in classrooms. Less than 0.2 percent of the nation's expenditure for elementary and secondary education is invested in research and development. That is too little—just a small fraction of what is needed to improve educational opportunity for all American children. It suggests that the U.S. is not seriously committed to having every child leave school reading and writing well. No for-profit industry would tolerate such a low level of investment in research. As Americans, we should be embarrassed to be investing so little in the future of our schools, classrooms, teachers, and children.

Third, parents, educators, and community leaders must develop broad-based involvement and support for reading and writing instruction. Families, community members, governmental bodies, public and private institutions, and business leaders all have resources they can contribute. Successful reform efforts reach beyond the classroom to partner with communities in supporting each child's reading and writing development.

The next decade will bring many new challenges. Schools will serve more children with greater needs than ever before. Meeting these challenges will require all those with a stake in children's future—parents, educators, government leaders, and members of the community—to work together to make a difference in children's lives. Honoring children's right to literacy will involve inevitable changes in how we view our roles, structure our classrooms, and support our children's learning. Making a difference will mean doing things differently. But the difference to be made is profound—a generation of American children, all of them competent readers and writers, leading the way to the future.

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POSITION STATEMENTS

As an advocate of excellence in the teaching of reading, the International Reading Association participates actively in the process of shaping sound public policy in education. Research-based positions on critical issues are disseminated through a series of position statements on such topics such as these:

Adolescent Literacy (1999).

Excellent Reading Teachers (2000).

High-Stakes Assessments in Reading (1999).

Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children (1998).

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Making a Difference Means Making It Different:
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Children's Literacy Rights

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Children have a right to classrooms that optimize learning opportunities.

JOURNALS

The International Reading Association publishes peer-reviewed journals that serve professionals at all levels in literacy education.

The Reading Teacher, a favorite of K–6 educators, features practical resources, tools, research findings, and reviews of children's literature and professional books. Published eight times a year, this popular publication covers the newest developments in elementary education.

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Reading Research Quarterly is the definitive journal for reading research and a "must read" for anyone pursuing a master's degree or doctorate. Committed to scholarship, this journal provides a forum for multidisciplinary research, alternative modes of inquiry, and varying viewpoints on reading instruction.

Lectura y vida is a Spanish-language quarterly published in Argentina. It offers insightful articles on research, theory, and practice applicable to reading instruction in Spanish at all levels.

Reading Online (www.readingonline.org) is a peer-reviewed interactive electronic journal that explores research, instruction, and communications in the reading field. *Reading Online* offers many opportunities for dialogue with both contributors and readers, and connects educators with colleagues worldwide.

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INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION

Dedicated to better reading through better teaching

The International Reading Association is dedicated to improved reading and literacy for all people. We believe that the success of this mission lies with educators who daily step up to the challenge of helping students master the literacy skills fundamental to all learning.

Founded on the premise that better teachers make better readers, IRA provides educators with a wealth of resources that foster reading success for all learners:

Professional development resources and opportunities to improve reading instruction and advance teaching goals

Access to the latest research on the reading process, as well as opportunities to pursue reading research

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